WASHINGTON POST
24 JANUARY 1983

Setting The Record Straight

Spilling the Personal Story Behind Britain's Great Spy Scandal

By Curt Suplee

Michael Straight sinks deeper down in his armchair and stares balefully into the fire.

He's been over it all so many times before, four decades of this canker at the soul's root. As a communist dupe, he had betrayed first his country and then his friends. Was he a spy or merely spineless? But always his suffering had been private—until two years ago, when suddenly there it was: the whole squalid chronicle crackling across the front pages.

So "I wrote the book to explain myself, to purge myself," Straight says, each weary phrase dying to a sigh. And to rebut the press accounts that "represented me as a spy for Soviet Russia, which I was not. I felt I owed it to my children and my grandchild to tell my own story," although "it's not a story I'm very proud of."

At 66, the author, former editor of The New Republic and former deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, has groped again through the murk of memory to produce "After Long Silence," his "political memoir" just published by Norton—one of the most extravagantly unflattering autobiographies in modern memory. "I knew I had a debt to pay" to the British and American people, he says, and is ready to "take whatever blame they

They have been heaping since March of 1981, when the London Daily Mail broke the story of his role in the spy scandal of the century: that it was Straight's belated confession in 1963 which led to the eventual unmasking of British art historian Anthony Blunt, then the queen's personal curator, as a Soviet agent.

Despite longstanding suspicions, there never had been hard evidence to tie Blunt to the treasons of Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean and Kim Philby—until Straight revealed that Blunt had recruited him to the communist underground in 1937 when both were at Cambridge. And more: acting under Blunt's directions, Straight had returned to America in 1937 and over the next four years, while working in the State and Interior departments, he met with and gave copies of his work to a Soviet agent named "Michael Green." Worse yet, he concealed his knowledge of Blunt and Burgess' activities until a routine FBI check for the Endowment post drove him to disclosure. Straight says he has encountered "absolutely no" social censure after his initial exposure in 1981, but the publication of his book has exposed him. William Safire has already fired off a salvo of contempt, but stopped short of calling Straight a traitor, if only because "no purpose or passion guided his double life." There will be more.

"The center of the judgment against me so far is that I failed to do anything with the information I had for some 25 years," says Straight, feeding the fireplace with newsprint between brooding pauses. "And essentially that's true. I'm not looking for praise—or for unjustified condemnation. I'm perfectly happy for people to say I was wrong or weak."

Weak. It's his explanation for why the son of one of America's most wealthy and prominent families (with a personality strong enough to become the first American elected president of the Cambridge Union, that formidable debating society and political incubator) would fall under the spell of the effete Blunt, agreeing—by not disagreeing—to aid The Communist International. "I lacked the will," he says. "I lacked the sense of self."

It's hard to believe at first, that this placid Bethesda squire in Shetland and flannels with the soft, still-boyish face barely chafed by time, snug in his Tudor enclave where J.R. the one-eyed dog guards the front door and a behemoth cat named Bananas pads under the centuries-old paintings, could lack a sense of self. Yet as he talks, Straight habitually defers to others for his ideas—punctuating his languid exposition with "historians say" or "no one now believes," reaching frequently for the small notebook he has filled with handwritten quotations—from Gide, Keynes, Koestler—about the movement which gave his life meaning. "The man who knows who he is remains an individual. I was submerging myself into a larger identity because I didn't know who I was. I had no roots, no separate identity. I didn't want one." He is slouching further now, wilting diagonally, hanging his right arm over the chair until the hand grazes the floor, voice sinking to a hospital waiting-room croak.

"I'd been transported from one country to another, I'd never had a father, my family was broken up—there was no continuity in my life of any kind. I wasn't held in place by tradition. I think tradition is very important."

His mother was a Whitney heiress and freethinker, his father an artist and diplomat. Together they founded The New Republic in 1914. (It would later provide their son with an occupation whenever he needed one: as a writer from 1940-41, publisher from 1946-48, and editor, 1948-56.) His father died in World War I (when Michael was 2), and his mother married Leonard Elmhirst, an iconoclastic English educator who convinced her to join him in founding a utopian academy in England. They moved there in 1926 and started Dartington Hall, where students grew their own vegetables, built livestock sheds, played bicycle polo and used unisex showers. By the time he was 12, Straight writes, he and his brother and sister "could not spell" but, "We were all too familiar with Freud's interpretation of dreams."

CONTINUED